

The potential role of an Ombuds Office in addressing academic bullying concerns

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Colleges and universities are the main stakeholders in addressing academic bullying. To help address a variety of concerns on campus, including academic bullying, many colleges and universities have established organizational Ombuds Offices as a place to bring any issue affecting one's work or studies. This article considers the role of Ombuds Offices in addressing the issue of academic bullying.

Self-reported issues of academic bullying are frequently raised at institutions of higher education [1–3]. Academic bullying is defined as repeated acts of discrimination, incivility or various types of harassment and threats that can affect students, postdoctoral fellows and faculty at all levels of experience [4,5].

Ombuds Offices are one of the first resources in addressing the issue of academic bullying. Here, I discuss the role of Ombuds Offices in addressing the issue of academic bullying including the following main questions: (a) what distinguishes an Ombuds Office from other campus resources? And, (b) what are the offerings and limits of their role and services in helping community members address concerns of academic bullying?

An Ombuds Office provides visitors with a highly confidential, independent and informal forum in which to help visitors clarify their concerns, identify their goals and consider all of their options in managing or resolving their concerns. The role of an Ombuds is as an impartial conflict resolution practitioner, helping individuals make their own best decisions about next steps—if any—to take. Ombuds also serve as advocates of fair processes and productive communication and may bring systemic issues forward to institutional leadership for their consideration. Institutions value the independence of the Ombuds, recognizing that this independence allows for a unique voice on campus, one unhindered

by agendas from, loyalties to or expectations of others in delivering messages to leadership about trends, hot-spots or concerns within the community. Some institutions provide Ombuds services for all members of the community while others make them available to a specific group—students, faculty, trainees and/or staff. The International Ombuds Association (IOA) provides professional standards that guide the practice of an Ombuds (<https://www.ombudsassociation.org/>).

Visitors to an Ombuds Office may share a variety of concerns related to self-reported academic bullying. For example, some common reports are that they are being forced to accept lesser credit for work than they feel they deserve. Others speak of abrasive behaviours in a laboratory or classroom—public disparagement of their academic work or ignoring them altogether, raised voices, the use of expletives. Others feel professional development opportunities have been intentionally withheld, and others fear retaliation for giving notice of their departure. The list is long, as is the list of other kinds of harassment brought to Ombuds—sexual and racial, just to name a few.

What can a visitor expect when visiting their local Ombuds?

Visitors interact with Ombuds offices for a variety of reasons. Some visitors simply want to talk in a

confidential and non-judgemental space. There can be comfort in giving voice to their concerns and in knowing that they retain control over future decisions. Some visitors want to be coached by an Ombuds to have a difficult conversation with the person with whom they have concerns. Maybe they have tried unsuccessfully before or maybe they are ready for a first conversation. Some visitors want to have a direct conversation but would like another person in the room. If a conversation is agreed to by both people, the Ombuds can either help them identify who that third person might be or the Ombuds may facilitate the conversation themselves if agreed to. Some visitors may want to consider bringing their concern to a local leader—their department chair, for example. The Ombuds can help think through these options and potential ways to raise their concerns. Some visitors may want information about options for filing a formal complaint. The Ombuds can educate them about any policies and procedures available and, when requested and appropriate, connect them with the office or individual administering formal complaints. Some visitors may want support services to help with the stress or isolation of their situation and the Ombuds can direct them to these services—mental health services, information about short-term leaves of absence, etc.

Overall, visitors can expect three main services from their local Ombuds offices which consist of: (a) careful and non-judgemental listening to help the visitor lay out and consider their concerns; (b) help in exploring their goals—both short- and long-term—in coming to the Ombuds Office; and (c) a discussion of a range of options that may be available to the visitor so that they can make their own best decisions about the next steps. These options may include additional services through the Ombuds Office and/or resources from other areas of the institution or from external providers.

What are the options when working with groups?

When academic bullying by someone is experienced by more than one individual, those individuals may want to visit the Ombuds as a group. There can be more safety and a more readily heard voicing of concerns when multiple people engage. If a group of visitors meet with an Ombuds to share similar academic bullying concerns about the same person, there are a number of options available to the group. The Ombuds may provide coaching so that the group—or a representative—can bring these concerns forward to leadership. Another option is to coach a group to go

directly to the person in question though this is seldom chosen because of fears of retaliation. Sometimes, with permission and when an Ombuds deems it appropriate, the Ombuds may be the one to share a group's concerns with leadership as their impartial messenger and, if invited, to help that leader to consider their options for responding.

What are the limits to an Ombuds role and services?

An Ombuds is not an advisor to or advocate for any individual who comes to their office. They are impartial and as such do not pass judgement on what is shared with them. If a visitor is seeking an advocate, the Ombuds can help them think through who might serve in this capacity.

When considering the impartiality of the Ombuds, it is important to note that Ombuds services are customarily provided free of charge to all visitors, with the institution providing the funding to support all aspects of the office. While some visitors may question the impartiality of the Ombuds given this arrangement, Ombuds offices are established *by their institutions* to be independent by design. This institutional understanding and commitment are reflected in the Office Charter, reflecting adherence to the IOA Standards of Practice.

The work of an Ombuds is at the informal level. Ombuds do not investigate complaints nor participate in investigations carried out by others. If someone chooses to file a formal complaint related to academic bullying (if available at their institution), the Ombuds can help direct them to that resource and then steps aside.

An Ombuds vigorously protects the confidentiality of their office with the exception of a report of imminent harm. Ombuds do not keep any records that contain information identifying a visitor and the IOA Standards of Practice, often included in an Ombuds Office charter, address additional protection provided to the Ombuds Office's confidentiality by its institution.

With permission from a visitor and at the Ombuds' discretion, the Ombuds may share information with others when warranted. If, over an extended period of time, an Ombuds hears from a number of community members about academic bullying by one individual, the Ombuds may bring this pattern forward if they feel they can protect the anonymity of past visitors.

Suggestions when visiting an Ombuds

Ombuds welcome visitors at any time. Those visitors dealing with self-reported academic bullying may want

to meet with an Ombuds as soon as concerns arise. In this way, the visitor may have a wider range of options to consider before dynamics become entrenched.

Newcomers to an Ombuds Office may want reassurance about the level of confidentiality of their visit. They will hear about the guarantees of and exceptions to the confidentiality provided by the Ombuds. A visitor may want to ask additional questions that will help them trust the practice of the Ombuds.

There can be value in considering the question 'who are your allies?' when talking with an Ombuds. Since academic bullying involves power differentials, knowing who may have some positive influence, who might be a visitor's advocate in the way that an Ombuds cannot be, may help with an informal resolution.

Keep an open mind. An Ombuds seeks to help visitors do their own best thinking in order to make their own best decisions about next steps to take in addressing their concerns. The range of options is vast and everyone assesses them differently. Some people will choose to ride out academic bullying in order to finish their work and move on to a healthier environment. Some will choose to file a formal complaint despite the potential personal and professional cost to them. Some will find 'work arounds'—for example, more time with other collaborators or finding another laboratory to move to.

Conclusion

Ombuds hear frequently about academic bullying concerns. While there are limits to an Ombuds' role, much can be gained in visiting an Ombuds Office. Having a chance to be heard without judgement, being provided support in getting clear about one's goals, and having a confidential space in which to consider the potential benefits and risks of a number of options can be important first steps in reclaiming one's voice and

sense of control during an upsetting and often damaging experience. As discussed, Ombuds can also play a more direct role when appropriate. Visiting the Ombuds Office whether proactively or reactively is an option always available to someone experiencing academic bullying.

Conflict of interest

Competing interests Morteza Mahmoudi discloses that (i) he is a co-founder and director of the Academic Parity Movement (www.paritymovement.org), a non-profit organization dedicated to addressing academic discrimination, violence and incivility; (ii) he is a Founding Partner at Partners in Global Wound Care (PGWC); and (iii) he receives royalties/honoraria for his published books, plenary lectures, and licensed patent.

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